ASPECTS OF ANCIENT INDIAN CULTURE

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A. L. BASHAM

HERAS INSTITUTE OF
INDIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

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Heras Memorial Lectures

1963

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A. L. BASHAM

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The Heras Memorial Lectures honour the memory of an eminent historian and archaeologist, the Rev. Henry Heras, S. J. Fr. Heras came to India from Spain in 1922 at the young age of 32 to be Professor of Indian History at St. Xavier's College, Bombay. He died there in 1955 after spending more than half of his life in digging up India's past to display to the world the glorious traditions and culture of the land he made his own and whose citizen he became.

Sponsored by the Fr. Heras Memorial Fund and by St. Xavier's College, the Memorial Lectures, which deal with themes pertaining to Indian History and Culture, were held for the first time in 1960, and have since then been an annual feature of the Heras Institute. In the years 1960-62 the lectures were delivered successively by Dr. H. D. Sankalia, Prof. K. A. Nilakanta Sastri and Prof. Holden Furber, and have been published by Asia Publishing House under the titles, *Indian Archaeology Today* (1962); *Sources of Indian History with Special Reference to South India* (1964); *Bombay Presidency in the Mid-Eighteenth Century* (1965), respectively. The present volume contains the fourth series of lectures.

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INTRODUCTION

IN JANUARY 1964 I was asked to give the three annual Heras Memorial Lectures at St. Xavier's College, Bombay, as a replacement for my good old friend Professor R. C. Majumdar, who had unfortunately been taken ill, and had had to cancel his appointment. At the time I was making a rapid lecture tour of India under the auspices of the British Council, and I had only three weeks notice. I had brought no detailed notes with me, and had no opportunity for preliminary research, so the best that I could offer was some general ideas of ancient Indian culture, with a few remarks on its effect on contemporary India. Each lecture was delivered on the basis of a page or two of rough notes, compiled in the course of journeys taking me to the four major cities of India, in 'planes, trains, and hotel bedrooms. The lectures were recorded, and typescripts were made of the tapes. These have been polished and improved on from the stylistic point of view, but the following pages represent the essential substance of my lectures. As the work of revision and preparation for the press was done in Mexico, where I had no access to an indological library, I have been unable to provide a full apparatus of references ; but nearly all my citations will be well known to Indologists.

Much of what the lectures contain I have said in different form elsewhere, and I make no claim for their originality. But each of them contains ideas about Indian life and thought which are in some respects contrary to those generally accepted, whether in India or the West. My views on the fundamental individualism of Indian social ideas, on the non-proven character of the commonplace axiom that India in the past has been only happy and prosperous under a single centralizing government, and on the sharp distinction between the inclusiveness of Indian thought and the exclusiveness of that of the

West, may well arouse some controversy. If they do so, I can only say to those who disagree with me that my views are put forward in all sincerity by one who has learnt to love India and Indians, and nothing that is written in the following pages is intended to disparage or belittle India or her ancient culture. Far less is it my intention to give gratuitous advice to the politicians of modern India, or to those who elect them. The reader of my second lecture will recognize that I have no political axe to grind, and that I do not believe that history is of any help in the study of contemporary politics, or can serve as a guide to politicians.

I am much indebted to Fr. John Correia-Afonso, of St. Xavier's, for supplying the typescripts of the tape recordings, without which these lectures could hardly have been reproduced in printed form, and for much patience in awaiting the final versions for publication. And I am equally indebted to the authorities of St. Xavier's, for greatly honouring me by inviting me to give the lectures, and to the British Council, which financed my visit to India on the occasion when the lectures were given.

A. L. BASHAM

London 1964

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I

SOCIAL LIFE

HONOURABLE Mr. Chairman, my friends :

First of all, I must thank you very sincerely for the kind things you have said about me and for honouring me by inviting me to give this course of lectures.

I never met the late Fr. Henry Heras personally, and I might have reason to disagree with some of his conclusions. But I have met many of his former students and I believe that he has probably done as much as any teacher of the history of India of his generation to stimulate and develop the study of ancient India in all its many aspects. And from his many friends and students I have learnt also that he was a most good and lovable man and an excellent teacher, whom I should have been honoured to meet, and so I am exceedingly proud to be allowed to give these lectures.

At the outset I must make it clear that I am here merely as a stop-gap. It was only about three weeks ago that I was asked to take this course. It was originally arranged that I should give only one public lecture, but I was asked to give these three owing to the fact that Professor R. C. Majumdar, a much greater man than I, who was to have given the Heras Memorial Lectures, had to withdraw at short notice owing to ill health. So I must impress upon you that my notes are very sketchy ; they have been put together at short notice, at odd moments in the course of rapid travelling, so please do not expect anything too learned or too profound. All I can do is to give you a few of my own ideas about certain salient features of ancient Indian culture.

We begin with a few observations on the social order and social life. I will assume that all my listeners have some idea of the main trends of the history of

India and that when I speak of Mohenjo-Dāro, the Mauryas, the Guptas, and so on, I shall be understood. I take it for granted that everybody here has a broad general knowledge of the general course of events—the Aryan invaders replacing the Harappā culture; the gradual consolidation of kingdoms to replace the semi-nomadic tribes, as Aryan culture expanded over northern India; the flowering of thought, especially of religious thought, and apparently also of material culture in the 6th century B.C.; the rise of the Mauryan Empire and its downfall; the age of invasions; the second great empire in northern India, the Guptas; and the fall of that empire, replaced by many warring kingdoms. What I have to say will have some bearing on all these phases and periods.

As Aryan culture developed, it absorbed many new elements and changed in the process. It is almost common knowledge that the idea of ancient Indian culture or classical Hindu culture, whatever we may call it, as a completely unaltering system which has been exactly the same for 3000 years is a completely false one, and there is no need for me to emphasize its falseness to those who study India's past. We must always bear in mind the fact of slow, steady and gradual change, and also we must bear in mind the fact of regional differences. The distinction between Āryāvarta, the northern half of India, and Dakṣināpatha, the southern peninsula, is one which has been recognized for well over two thousand years.

Nevertheless, from the earliest times there was a strong sense of Aryan solidarity, in spite of the fact that the implications of the term Aryan changed over the centuries. At first it had a purely racial connotation, but after a few centuries it began to lose this racial significance, and its sense became primarily cultural or religious. In classical India, on which I am chiefly concentrating, the Aryan was the twice born man who supported and followed a certain distinct and thoroughly regularized way of life. By the time that Aryan culture had covered virtually the whole of the sub-continent, the concept had developed that this area of land, known as Bhāratavarṣa, was particularly suited to Aryan culture and was its home. It would seem that nearly all recollections of an original home of the Aryans outside India had already disappeared when most of the hymns of the Ṛg Veda were being composed. Thus when we deal with the India of early days we must not think of a land unconscious of her individuality. There were even certain traditions of political unity, not by any means as intense or strong as some would like us to believe, but significant nevertheless. About them I shall speak at greater length in my next lecture. These traditions may have developed as a result of the expansion of the Mauryan Empire, and in many circles they were soon largely forgotten. But the cultural unity of India was always consciously recognized.

Throughout the writings of the period there is this sharp sense of contrast between the Aryans of Bhāratavarṣa, who support the caste system and respect the Brahmans on the one hand, and the degenerate heretics and outer barbarians who do not support that way of life on the other. Bhāratavarṣa, the Aryan land, is pure and holy. The pilgrim could and did travel its whole length and breadth unimpeded by any political boundaries that may have existed at the time. If he were an educated pilgrim, he would find a *lingua franca* in Sanskrit, the language of religion, administration and education, which was spoken by all educated people and in many parts of India was apparently more or less understood even by the uneducated. This cultural solidarity of Hinduism was always maintained. It was a most potent force in preserving Hindu civilization against the various waves of invasion which might otherwise have overwhelmed it on many occasions, and also in assimilating many of the invaders when they settled in the land.

The history of India before the coming of the Muslims falls into fairly clearly defined periods, and culturally as well as politically there has always been change, usually steady and quite unspectacular but probably no slower than the comparable cultural changes in Europe in the many centuries of civilization before the Renaissance, when for some reason, which has not yet been fully or satisfactorily explained, European civilization began to forge ahead much more rapidly than before, and to outstrip all the other cultures of the world for a while.

In spite of its broad unity, Hindu culture was not uniform throughout the length and breadth of the subcontinent and it is far from uniform today, when contact is much easier. There has always been an obvious distinction between the Indo-Aryan speaking areas of the north and the Dravidian, especially the Tamil-speaking, areas of the south. And there are many other regional differences due to climatic conditions, varying influences from outside India, inheritances from local prehistoric cultures, or heterodox movements such as Buddhism and Jainism which were stronger in some regions than in others. Again, since the Muslim invasion, Hindu culture has been varyingly affected by Islam according to the political pressure brought to bear by Muslim rulers and the success or otherwise of Muslim missionary efforts, both of which were much stronger in the north than in the south.

Moreover there is ample evidence that at any one time and in any given region there was often more than one school of thought on many questions relevant to the proper organization of society and the nature of political power, just as there was in matters of religion and philosophy. We find in the standard text books, which for generations have been diligently studied by thousands of Indian university students, statements such as: "ancient India believed in the divinity of the king", "ancient India did not believe in the divinity of the king", "ancient India maintained that the king was the ultimate owner of all the land in his kingdom", "ancient

India believed in the private ownership of land". All these propositions cannot be true without qualification, though their authors produce sources to justify them. In approaching these questions let us allow for difference of opinion even in the same kingdom and at the same time ; there must have been much debate and discussion on such theoretical problems. There was no uniform, universally accepted dogma on points such as these.

In all the thought of early India in the realm of politics, one broad theme may be traced. Government, whatever form it may take, is not an end in itself. The Hegelian concept of the state as an organism of supernatural size and power, transcending all other entities upon earth and mystically linking man with the Absolute, is completely foreign to anything ever thought of in India. One can find ideas adumbrating this extreme Hegelian position in the classical world and in China, but never in India. I believe that the comparison is much closer between India and medieval Europe than that between India and the Classical West or India and China. The Thomist doctrine of the State as the means of promoting salvation, *mutatis mutandis*, would have been widely held in ancient and classical Hindu India, for it was believed that prior to any government was the eternal divine order of society, the complex of ideas and practices linked up with that pregnant and untranslatable word *Dharma*. Dharma is the right course of conduct at any given time for any given individual within the framework of his society. The ideal society is that which promotes the Dharma of its members until ultimately, usually after many rebirths, they obtain *Mokṣa*, release from the tedious and painful process of transmigration in a final state of complete psychic equilibrium which is variously interpreted as the merging of the individual in the Absolute, the union of the soul with a personal God, the dissolution of the personality in an indescribable state called *Nirvāṇa*, or the complete separation of spirit and matter.

Therefore, before we can speak of the political order, we must consider the social order which politics was supposed to maintain. From the point of view of the orthodox Hindu, though not from that of the Buddhist, this social order was final, permanent, pre-ordained and part of the order of the universe. In theory, it was closely connected with the concept of *varṇa*, which I insist on calling 'class'. The word 'caste' is often loosely and wrongly applied to *varṇa*, a usage which is completely unscientific. There are only four *varṇas*. There never have been less than four or more than four. It is said that at the present time there are 3000 castes, and the number of castes is known to have risen, and perhaps has sometimes fallen, over the past 2000 years. Caste and *varṇa* are quite different institutions, different in origin, different in purpose, and different in function. *Varṇa*, as is well known, literally means colour, and it seems probable that the four *varṇas* arose from the class structure of the Vedic Aryan tribesmen under the influence on the one hand of contact with darker aborigines and on the other of the rising pretensions of the priesthood, who constituted themselves as a separate class. We meet the four classes first in a very famous hymn of the *Rg Veda* (X. 90), perhaps composed about 900 B.C., where it is stated that at the creation of the universe the Brahman emerged from the head of the great sacrificial victim, the Puruṣa, the Kṣatriya from his arms, the Vaiśya from his trunk, and the Śūdra, the hewer of wood and drawer of water, from his legs.

Theoretically all members of Aryan society belong to one or other of these classes, and as a corollary of this legend they are separate and independent species of being, coming from different parts of the original divine man who was slain at the creation of the world. Just as horses and cattle are different species, so Brahman, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya and Śūdra are different species. Those who do not fall into any of these categories are completely inferior barbarians. But all through the history of Hindu India down to the coming of the Muslims, and to some extent even later, exterior groups from time to time found their way into the Aryan order of society by one means or another, in most cases through the fiction that they were *vrātyas*, Aryans by origin who had fallen away from the orthodox norms.

The first three classes enjoyed special privileges, for they were 'twice-born'. They received religious training, and they alone were allowed, on reaching puberty, to hear and recite the Vedas. The Śūdras were at best second-class citizens, but they had definite status and definite rights. The Sacred Law lays down different scales of punishment and reward and different standards of conduct for these four classes, because they are different species of being, and as such they cannot be expected all to do the same thing or to behave in the same way. Moreover, miscegenation of different species was not looked upon as a good thing. The mixture of the four classes became progressively more rare as the social order hardened, though in early times allowance was made for certain types of hypergamy.

But in fact the class was, and probably still is, less significant to the ordinary man than the caste, unless he is a Brahman. A man may not always be conscious of the fact that he is a Vaiśya or a Śūdra, but he is likely to be much aware of being, for instance, a *kāyasth*, a *sonār*, or a *kaivarta*. The thousands of castes of classical India arose from survivals of tribalism, from a tendency for professions to become hereditary, common to many peoples all over the civilized world, and from the endogamous propensities of a social order with an already established tradition of hierarchic degree. These were the factors, among others, which led to the slow development of caste institutions all over India from the days before the Buddha down to the present, increasing, ramifying and growing in number, as with time more and more non-Aryan peoples were brought into the Aryan order. Theoretically, as we can gather from reading Manu and other Dharmaśāstra texts, the castes were sub-divisions of the four *varṇas* or classes, the result of miscegenation, but in fact they had an entirely different origin and they were much more spontaneous and organic in their growth. It seems that there was always a certain artificiality about the four classes, which are very important in the theoretical texts on Dharma but which in everyday life may have played a comparatively minor role.

Lesser units of the social structure were the extended family (*kula*) and the joint family (*kuṭumba*). It was this latter, and not the individual, which was the basic unit of society. Even today we could find in many parts of India family units consisting of as many as 30 or 40 people, owning lands and other property in common under the authority and management of a *paterfamilias*. The individual of either sex was thus made strongly conscious of his or her membership of a larger unit of society, which was in turn a member of a still larger unit, culminating in the whole of the Aryan people of Bhāratavarṣa, the *Ārya jana*, outside which were the barbarians of varying degrees of impurity, of whom some were yet capable of regeneration, and others so utterly impure that they were to be kept at a considerable distance and were only fit for the most dirty and menial of tasks. The latter type, about which we read comparatively little in our texts though it must have formed an important section of the population, was no doubt chiefly composed of survivals of aboriginals and groups which through infringement of caste traditions or otherwise had lost their Aryan status. Such people nowadays are variously called untouchables, depressed classes, scheduled castes, or, as Mahatma Gandhi liked to call them, 'Harijans' or people of God. Most ancient Indian literature ignores such people, and but little research has been done upon their conditions in early times. They appear even in those days, as later, to have led very restricted lives on a very low income level.

Each of these groups had its dharma, its traditional norm of conduct which was given the force of divine writ. Over and above these dharmas there was a common Dharma, incumbent upon all men alike : to speak the truth, to revere the gods, to honour one's parents, and so on. Beyond such general ethical precepts, however, each individual had his own special dharma, according to his place in the social order. The dharma of the Brahman was to learn and to teach ; the dharma of the Kṣatriya to govern justly and to fight, that of the Vaiśya to produce wealth, and that of the Śūdra to serve others. And the higher ranks had in theory correspondingly heavier obligations. The Brahman was expected to maintain a very austere way of life, and to refrain from what for the lower classes were legitimate pleasures of life, such as drinking alcohol and gambling. Though there is plenty of evidence to show that often the Brahman's life was not one of dignified austerity in practice, at least this was the ideal that was set before him. The Śūdra, on the other hand, might gamble and drink to his heart's content without losing caste. Each caste had its own particular customs with regard to marriage, trade and so on, and these were all part of the caste dharma, which was usually thought of as eternal and immutable, though there is no doubt that these customs were challenged and altered from time to time. Similarly, the traditional practices of family groups were dharma for the family members. The lesser units of society, the castes, the clans, the village groups and the families, formed autonomous corporations with their own traditional regulations and customs, governed by committees, and armed with certain sanctions such as fining and expulsion, which made them states within states, as far as their members were concerned. It was in theory the main purpose of government to maintain these corporate entities and to enforce their traditional rules, rather than to legislate.

Behind all social and political activity, in the thought of the orthodox, was the doctrine of the three aims of life. This doctrine is not always given the importance and emphasis that it deserves, for I believe that it had considerable formative influence on the everyday life of ancient India. The three aims are *Dharma*, *Artha* and *Kāma*. I paraphrase them loosely as 'Piety, Profit and Pleasure'. The claims of righteousness, of religion, of gaining merit in order to win a happier rebirth, override those of profit and of sensual and other pleasures. The claims of profit, of building up the family fortunes, override those of pleasure. But pleasure itself is not to be disparaged. All three aims are valid ; all three are good things to strive for and all three are worth having. This is not the ascetic ideal which later Hindu teachers tried to impose on the people. All three aims—piety, profit and pleasure—should be pursued and striven for, but in a balanced manner, so that the family man does not so devote himself to piety that he neglects all his other affairs and his family responsibilities, and the sensualist does not so devote himself to pleasure and the satisfaction of his senses that he cares nothing for his family fortunes or for his immortal soul.

If pursued correctly the three aims ultimately lead on to a fourth one—*Mokṣa*, or complete release from the cycle of transmigration. From Gupta times onwards, in the medieval *praśastis*, of which so many have survived from both northern and southern India, we frequently read that such and such a king promoted the three or the four aims of his subjects ; or that such and such a king, being a very righteous ruler, knew just how to balance the three aims for himself. Such references to the *traivargya puruṣārtha*, the threefold aim of man, occur so frequently in so many different contexts that I cannot but believe that it played a very big part in the thought of classical India and in moulding the outlook of the people.

My concluding point is a little unconventional and controversial. Most modern writers on ancient Indian social and political life like to emphasize the corporate character of ancient Indian society. They are no doubt right in doing so, for it certainly had this corporate character. Nevertheless, on final analysis, ancient India was fundamentally individualistic. Such a view may be unpopular in an age when social solidarity is so much emphasized, and nobody would question the corporate nature of ancient society in most of its aspects. But both Hinduism and Buddhism are essentially individualistic religions in a sense which some other ancient systems, such as early Judaism and Confucianism, were not.

In Hinduism, as we have seen, society is prior to government, and government, at least in theory, exists to serve the purpose of society. But why is society there ? Why are there four classes, multifarious castes, an immense number of clans, and innumerable families ? Why is it good that men should follow the dharma of their own castes, their own clans and their own families and not those of others ? "It is better to do your own job badly", says Kṛṣṇa, preaching to Arjuna, "than to do another fellow's job well". Because only by doing your own job, by following the dharma of your own group, do you serve your own spiritual and material welfare. The only good reason ever given for the existence of this increasingly complicated and increasingly rigid social system was that in this benighted *Kali Yuga*, the age of iron, it was essential for the satisfactory pursuit of the three *puruṣārthas*, the three aims of the person, the individual. In ordinary life the individual person must belong to a group of some sort. If he obeyed his king, his caste leaders and his *paterfamilias*, he might be enabled to live the good life, and develop his potentialities to the full. If he did not follow the practices of his caste and family, he would become a miserable isolated outcaste, with no home and no fellow-men, left entirely to his own devices and able to associate freely only with the lowest of the low. But the three aims of life were themselves only a means to an end, which was *Mokṣa*, salvation, and salvation was entirely a matter for the individual.

The Jewish prophets, at least until the days of Jeremiah, looked for the salvation of the whole house of Israel. Confucius and his followers tramped from one corner to the other of the civilized part of China, attempting to save 'the Great Society'. The ancient Indian *ṛṣis*, on the other hand, had no high hopes of saving society, for inevitably society was declining and degenerating, to be restored only when the *Satya Yuga*, the age of gold, came round once more. The one hope of salvation was the salvation of the individual. Following the social code was after all only a means to an end, bringing a man safely up the lower rungs of the ladder of spiritual development, above which he had to climb by himself, without the support of social regulations, a simple individual striving alone to achieve union with God or the Absolute as a *sannyāsī* or ascetic. The ascetic ideal contained within itself the negation of the social values of orthodoxy on the lower level, and it is to my mind a wonderful achievement of the Hindu spirit of assimilation that these two disparate ideals could be fused into a single system of thought which even today is very much alive.

If we turn to the greatest and the most important of the heterodox systems, Buddhism, we find that it lays even more emphasis on ultimate individualism. In the last days of his life, the Buddha is reported to have told his followers to be lamps unto themselves, refuges unto themselves. The ideal Buddhist monk walks alone, 'like the rhinoceros', pouring out goodwill upon an earth with which he is not identified except by his own personal acts of compassion. And for Buddhism all things resolve themselves into an infinite number of component factors. Just as the word 'chariot' is a convenient piece of verbal shorthand for what is actually a complicated arrangement of metal and wood, so is the word 'man' a convenient popular term for a complicated and rapidly altering arrangement of ideas, aims, emotions and thoughts in a framework of flesh and bone which alters equally rapidly. If on final analysis the enduring individual personality has no real and ultimate existence, so much the less is there any real validity in terms like family, caste, class, society, state, or even mankind itself. Buddhism is thus at the opposite pole to Hegelianism. The whole for Buddhism is no more than the sum of its parts. In fact the whole has no real existence. It is just a convenient term for describing very complicated phenomena which could not be described otherwise. In the teaching of the other important heterodoxy, Jainism, the ultimate individualism is even more pronounced, because the whole aim of Jainism is completely to isolate the soul from all contact with matter or with anything else, in order to restore it to its pristine state of purity, completely alone and sufficient unto itself.

So ancient Indian thought on political, social and religious questions, despite all appearances to the contrary, was on final analysis individualistic. Prior to the state, prior to all governments, was the divine social order, in the service of which government was invented and, according to the most widespread tradition, was imposed from on high. And prior to the divine social order were millions of embodied souls, each striving for perfection in complete union with the one entity which lay beyond all time and change. It was to serve the real and true needs of the individual that society was thought to exist.

II

POLITICAL LIFE

THERE is so much to be said about ancient Indian political ideas that one could write half a dozen books on them, and it is impossible to reduce even the most important aspects of the subject down to one lecture; so here I can only bring out a few points which in my opinion are rather significant, but which are perhaps not sufficiently stressed in some of the text-books on the subject.

I confine my attention entirely to kingship. It is well-known that in certain parts of India, at certain times, there were forms of government that we can justifiably call republics, whether of democratic or oligarchical constitution, but these were never the standard form of government in classical India, and so we put them on one side for the purpose of this lecture. We have seen that government was believed to be the servant of the social order. As society existed ultimately for the welfare of the individual, so government existed for the welfare of society. Another point on which most parties in ancient India would have agreed, whether Hindu, Buddhist or Jain, was that government was an unfortunate necessity in an age of cosmic decline. In the more virtuous and happier days of the past there was no need of government. As the world degenerated, a period of anarchy came about, when civilized life was virtually impossible, and the eternal order of class and caste was no longer maintained. So kingship came into existence, in order to preserve as much as was possible of the age of gold in a period of universal degeneration. There are a number of legends with this purport, which seem to have replaced earlier legends which, as we can gather from the Vedic literature, told of the appointment of the first king of the gods as a war leader, chosen by his peers to lead them in war against the demons.[1] This tradition about the origin of kingship seems to have faded away in later times, as settled regional kingdoms were established, and it was only then that there appeared the doctrine of kingship as a means of preserving society, rather than as a means of preserving the tribe from external attack. The new legends were no doubt inspired by the great fear of anarchy, *Matsya-nyāya*. Particularly significant are the two legends in the *Śānti Parvan* of the *Mahābhārata*, one of which[2] tells us that, in a time of anarchy in the distant past, men met together and made an agreement to keep the peace and to expel evildoers. The agreement was not kept and conditions became worse than before, and so mankind in a body waited on Brahmā, the High God, and asked his help. He ordained Manu as the first king. Manu first refused to become king on account of the difficulty and the cruelty involved in his task, but the people persuaded him with promises of shares of their crops and herds and a share of their religious merit also. Here we see the king as a divinely ordained being, decreed by God to meet human need at human request, in order to save man's life from being "mean, brutish and short". The king enjoys his authority partly by human consent, but partly also by divine decree.

The other story in the *Śānti Parvan*[3] gives us a rather different picture. Again we have the account of the decline of the world. The Vedas were forgotten, the religious rituals were no longer performed, but it was the gods who suffered rather than men, and it was the gods, not the men, who approached Brahmā to put things right. Brahmā composed the archetypal text on polity, and then the gods turned to Viṣṇu, the ruler of heaven, and asked him to ordain a king. He created the first king out of his own mind, a miraculous and a supernatural being, to rule over men, and to ensure that they fulfilled their religious duties.

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[1] *Ait, Br.* i. 14, *Tai. Up.* i. 5. [2] *Mbh.* xii. 67. [3] *Ibid.* xii. 59

The continuation of the story is exceedingly interesting. We are told how Virajas, the first king, was succeeded by others, until the throne came in succession to the wicked Veṇa, who deliberately forced the castes and classes to intermarry until he was destroyed by the *ṛṣis*. Then King Pṛthu was produced from his right arm and was filled with the godhead of Viṣṇu himself. The main point of this story is that the first king is truly a divine figure, imposed from on high, without any intervention on the part of mankind themselves, in order to maintain religion and society. The king is here the servant of the gods rather than the servant of men.

At the other extreme, we have the Buddhist legend of the Mahāsammata in the *Dīgha Nikāya*.[1] "The Great Elected One" was chosen at an enormous gathering of the people at a time when private property and the family were no longer being respected. He was appointed in order to maintain law and order, and he was expected to depend for his livelihood on a share of the crops and herds, which he received in return for his services. Thus he held office as a social servant, and the legend is a very early version of the widespread and well-known doctrine of social contract.

In these three legends we have three different ideas of kingship. At the one extreme, in the Buddhist story, the king is merely a servant of the people, and is entitled to levy taxes only in return for fulfilling his task of protection; midway we meet the king as a divinely appointed figure, but appointed by the will of the people and at their request; and finally, at the other extreme, the king is entirely divine and is imposed from on high without reference to the wishes of his subjects, in order to keep the people pious.

Thus in ancient India there were at least three major concepts of the nature of kingship as well as others of less importance, and they existed side by side. The *Arthaśāstra* shows that both could be used according to circumstances for propaganda purposes. At one place the king is advised to instruct his spies and secret agents to let it be known among the people that he is divine.[1] At another he is advised to tell his troops that he is a paid servant just as they are.[2] Hence it would seem that the doctrine of the royal divinity and that of the king as an ordinary citizen and a social servant might both be current in the same kingdom and under the same king, and that either might be emphasized according to circumstances. As far as orthodox Hindu texts are concerned, however, there is no question that the most influential of these concepts was that of the royal divinity. We must always remember that the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the law book of Manu, which emphasize the doctrine of royal divinity, were much more influential in most parts of India than were the *Dīgha Nikāya* and the *Kauṭilīya Arthaśāstra*. We must also remember that the doctrine of the royal divinity does not necessarily imply that "the king can do no wrong". We do find statements to this effect in certain texts, the most explicit being that in the law book of Nārada, but in general the ancient Indian conception of divinity was very different from that of the modern West. Brahmans are gods on earth; husbands are gods to their wives; teachers are gods to their students (One of my former students still writes to me "my dear Guru Deva"). Thus incarnate divinity is almost commonplace. The fact that the original king came down from heaven as the son of Viṣṇu perhaps did not make much difference in practice.

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[1] *D.N.*, vol. iii, pp. 92-3.

Etymologically the word *rājya*, "kingdom", implies merely "that which pertains to or comes from the king". It seems to me very doubtful whether any real concept of the State in the modern sense, as something distinct from the king and his officers, existed in ancient India. Some authors have pointed to the formula of the seven *prakṛtis*, the seven elements of government, as an ancient

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[1] *Arthaśāstra*, xiii, 1. [2] *Ibid.*, x. 3.

Indian counterpart of the State in western political theory, and this formula may adumbrate such a concept in embryonic form. But in none of the references known to me do the seven *prakṛtis* amount to anything like a State in the Platonic and the Hegelian sense. The only text which gives a more developed and organized concept of the State, based on the formula of the seven *prakṛtis*, is the *Śukra Nītisāra* and this has finally been shown to be a product of the early 19th century, the work of a pandit who knew a good deal about the Maratha administration and the regulations of the East India Company and decided that it was time to bring out an up-to-date text on politics for the benefit of those mahārājas who still existed. So in the study of ancient Indian government we must leave Śukra out of consideration. Here I must emphasize the point that in maintaining that ancient India had no developed concept of the State, I am in no way trying to belittle ancient India, and there is no value judgment implied. I do not think it necessarily derogatory to maintain that ancient India had no clear idea of the State. Far too much emphasis has been laid by many western political philosophers on such completely abstract entities as states, nations and so on, which have no real existence except in the minds of the theorists. The ideas of these people, like the monster of Frankenstein, have sometimes almost destroyed their creators.

Thus the primary purpose of the king, and of the government as an extension of the king, is the protection of the social order. This is done with the aid of *daṇḍa*, "punishment" or "coercion", because, as Manu put it so tersely, "a sinless man is hard to find".[1]

There are other features of the king's status and function, however, which are not always sufficiently emphasized in the textbooks on ancient Indian polity. One which impresses me very strongly, as a sort of corollary of the doctrine of the royal divinity, is the mystical identification of the king and the kingdom, the former being a microcosm of the latter. Widespread among peoples of ancient times and among backward peoples of recent centuries all over the world is the idea that the welfare of the community and of the crops and herds was dependent on the vitality and the virility of the chief. Traces of this primitive concept may be found in India in later Vedic times, notably in the *Rājasūya* sacrifice, which seems to have originated as a rejuvenation ceremony in order to revitalize the chief of the tribe. Such rejuvenation ceremonies, magically restoring the king's strength and obviating the necessity of putting him to death for the welfare of his people, have been attested in other parts of the world, among ancient and primitive peoples. A very striking parallel existed in ancient Egypt, where in prehistoric times the king was put to death in old age. Later the Egyptians devised a suitable religious ceremony known as *sed*, whereby he was magically rejuvenated.

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[1] Manu, vii, 38.

This very primitive belief seems to have developed in India, as it did in China, in an ethical direction. The king, his subjects, the animals, the plants, the land they live in, and even meteorological phenomena, form an organic whole. This is not often explicitly stated, but it seems to be implicit in many passages of ancient Indian literature. The righteous behaviour of the people produces a righteous king. Conversely a righteous king produces a righteous people. In modern terms, the people get what government they deserve. But the moral conduct of the king has results far wider than those due to a mere practical cause-and-effect relationship in bringing about the welfare of his subjects. If the king is virtuous, it is not merely a question of his governing wisely and justly and thus making his subjects happy. The king's merit has an effect upon the whole cosmos. As a result of his good conduct, the crops and herds flourish, rain falls at the right time and in the right quantity, and the rivers flow without drying up on the one hand or causing floods on the other. We can find numerous examples of this idea, for instance in the Chronicle of Kashmir, the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*. The isolated incident of the slaughter of a Brahman's wife was the cause of a king and his capital being destroyed by a rain of fire. Huṣka, Juṣka and Kaniṣka were Buddhists, and in their reigns the orthodox rites were neglected. Hence there was exceptionally heavy snowfall every winter, in which the Buddhists were killed in large numbers. Many passages of this kind are to be found in the Kashmir Chronicle. The king is the lord of animals as well as of men, and is responsible for their good behaviour; and the evils of the kingdom are due to his failings. Such an idea is clearly expressed in the Greek inscription of Aśoka discovered a few years ago at Kandahar: "Now, owing to the piety of the king everything prospers throughout the world". There seems to be more than a mere cause-and-effect relationship in Aśoka's words, which apparently imply a mystical identification of the king and his kingdom. And in the last resort the evil king brings about the ruin of his State not merely by neglect, cruelty and bad policy, but by his own inner depravity, which supernaturally affects the whole land, including the crops and herds.

So the king, the people, the land and the natural phenomena in ancient India were thought of as united in a way quite transcending all rational explanation, and we should not look for rational explanations of ancient beliefs. It shows a fundamental lack of historical sense to expect the people of any part of the world, down to the 19th century, to have thought and felt in the same way as we, whose attitudes, whatever our race or faith, have been largely conditioned by scientific concepts.

This ancient Indian idea was closely linked up with the doctrine of Karma, and it is something very different from the organic theory of the State. All things in the kingdom, not merely the people, but the phenomena of nature and all that the kingdom contains, are members one of another. Righteousness brings blessings and material welfare. The righteousness of the people has an effect on the weather. The king is a very exceptional being and is divine, therefore his righteousness has a very special effect on the weather and the other phenomena. The king shares this characteristic with learned and pious Brahmans and particularly holy and powerful ascetics. It was thought to be very good to have a specially saintly ascetic in the neighbourhood, because he would bring prosperity to the district. I think this is still believed by many simple and less well-educated Indians.

The king is responsible for the protection of the order of the society, but he also has the responsibility of "pleasing the people". If we relate his protection of the social order to *Dharma*, we may relate his duty of pleasing the people to *Artha* and *Kāma*. The king's benevolent aspect is almost as emphatically underlined in our texts as is his responsibility for the punishment of the transgressor of the social norms.

A psychological attitude towards the king very much like that towards the *paterfamilias*, who is both feared and loved, a sort of family relationship between the king and his subjects, is frequently to be noticed. That the king is in a sense the father of his people is implicit in Indian political thought. An impressive indication of this is the common word *prajā*, which means progeny, and also means the king's subjects. As long as they are law-abiding, the king is responsible for the welfare of all who dwell in his realm including the animals. In many places we find the king depicted as an almost fanatical do-gooder. He must actively promote the material welfare of his subjects, as he promotes their spiritual welfare, protects the social order and patronizes the Brahmans. In the ideal kingdom, nobody suffers hunger. Sometimes the king appears rather as a vehicle of what we may call, to use a much later expression, the general will. "Not that which pleases himself, but that which pleases the people he should consider as good", says the *Arthaśāstra.*[1]

The story of the banishment of Sītā in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is worth noting in this connection. Rāma is the ideal king. He is told by his spies that, on account of Sītā's unfortunate experience in Rāvana's palace, the people are becoming restive, because they believe that there is an impure woman in the court and they are afraid that the country will suffer ruin as a result. Rāma knows perfectly well that Sītā is thoroughly pure; yet for the good of the kingdom, and because this is what the people want, he sends her away. We find this principle most strongly emphasized in the inscriptions of Aśoka: "All men are my children, and as I desire for my children that they should obtain welfare and happiness both in this world and in the next, the same do I desire for all men . . . . Whatever may be my great deeds, I have done them in order to discharge my debt to all beings. I work for their happiness in this life in order that in the next life they may gain heaven." The last sentence of these rather free paraphrases is very interesting because it reminds one of the policy of some modern religious propagandists: "You cannot save men's souls unless you first save their bodies".

So the ideal king works for the practical welfare of his people. How far in actual fact this was done is another question, but the accounts of the early travellers suggest that many Indian kings did seriously strive for their people's good. We need not take account of the numerous inscriptions where kings are described as working indefatigably for the welfare of the four classes, for these may be exaggerated; but Megasthenes' account of the administration of Candragupta Maurya, for instance, tends to confirm the general impression given by the literature on politics. Candragupta appears to have been a very severe and stern monarch, but his regime was benevolent, and Megasthenes, remarks on the prosperity of the people, on their freedom, and on the absence of slavery and oppression among them. Similar impressions are given by Chinese and early Arab travellers, and it is only from the 15th century onwards that we get a picture of India as a land where a few immensely wealthy nobles grind down hordes of hungry serfs. The first foreign traveller, incidentally, to give that impression was the fifteenth century Russian merchant, Alexander Nikitin.

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[1] *Arth.*, i. 16.

The king's positive duty of pleasing the people was expressed in many ways. It was an element in his system of justice. It led to the encouragement of agriculture and irrigation, the fixing of fair prices, famine relief, medical help, the care of widows, the promotion of religion, which gave various practical benefits to the people as well as spiritual ones, and the holding of what in later India were called "tamashas".

Another very significant aspect of the king's activity is not much emphasized by modern writers, but it is well worthy of notice. The third of the three aims is Kāma, pleasure. The king fulfils the aim of Dharma by his protection and his justice ; he fulfils the aim of Artha by promoting the material welfare of his subjects. And in the time left to him from his many duties he is perfectly entitled to enjoy life in whatever way is legitimately possible. In the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, composed well before the time of the Buddha, the king is referred to as *viśām attā*, "the eater of the people", that is the enjoyer of the people, or of whatever the people can provide for him in the way of goods and services. Elsewhere, he is their *bhoktā*, literally their "enjoyer". What is the implication of these terms ? In many texts and inscriptions of medieval India, we find phrases which refer to a given king as having won the sea-girt earth as a bride in a *svayaṁvara*, the bride's choice of ancient heroic days. The king was in some sense not merely the father of his people, but also the husband of the land and all it contained.

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I do not know of any passage in an ancient Indian text where the full implications of these concepts are worked out. But it is evident that the husband is the lord and master of his wife, according to Hindu tradition, and he has the right to devoted self-effacing obedience and service from his wife. His rights over his wife are not quite unlimited. There is no question of his possessing full rights of life and death over her ; legally he cannot kill her, however wicked she may be. Moreover he cannot give her away to another man, at least if he is a member of a respectable caste. He can, if his wife is unfaithful or otherwise unsatisfactory, send her away and marry again, but he cannot finally divorce her. The husband and the wife are linked together by a supernatural bond which is quite inseparable once the marriage is made. Morally, a husband is expected to treat his virtuous wife with love and respect, to feed her and to clothe her as best he can afford, and to be kind and gentle to her. But there is no question that the wife is the husband's shadow, and her legal status differs from that of a slave mainly in that she cannot be given away or sold. This must be the implication of the concept of the king as the husband of the kingdom.

The corollary of this is that the king, when off duty, is entitled to all the luxuries and comforts that his land and its people can provide. So, from Megasthenes onwards, foreign travellers were much impressed by the great pomp and luxury of the Indian king, who, despite the heavy duties which the textbooks prescribed for him, seems to have managed to find plenty of time for his pleasures. "After duly fulfilling his Dharma by protecting his people, and after caring for Artha (profit), he enjoyed the objects of the senses like a veritable God of Love". One may find passages like this in many medieval inscriptions, and here again we see the influence of the three aims of life upon Indian thought. The ascetic king sometimes appears in legend, but in general the ideal king is very much a man of the world, waited on by hundreds of women servants, and living in highly civilized and cultured luxury.

Another corollary of this doctrine of the king as the husband and enjoyer of the land is that, in theory at least, he has qualified ownership over it, though some jurists in ancient and classical India certainly maintained that he had not that ownership. The only explanation of the conflicting texts on the royal ownership of land is that put forward by Dr. U. N. Ghosal many years ago,[1] and then, unfortunately, apparently rejected by the same author—there was a difference of opinion among the theorists on this matter.

My last topic in this rather incoherent lecture is the imperial ideals of ancient India. This question is rather a thorny one, and has been the subject of a certain amount of prejudice, which was created by the British and has been inherited by the independent India of the present day. I must stress the fact that here I am merely giving what I believe ancient India thought to be the ideal way of governing Bhāratavarṣa, and in no sense am I advising politicians on how India should be governed nowadays. I believe very strongly that history does not repeat itself. Every historical situation is unique and demands unique treatment. And what was good for India a thousand or more years ago is not necessarily good for the India of the present time. So please do not think that I am in any way trying to dabble in contemporary Indian politics. I have neither the right nor the qualifications to do so.

We know that the Mauryas welded the whole of the sub-continent together for about 150 years. Later on the Guptas did the same, but in northern India only, for about the same time. Later still the Mughals did so again, and even later the East India Company did so. Some 50 or 60 years ago, the text of the *Arthaśāstra* was discovered—one of the most important texts to have survived from ancient India—with a polity which apparently amounted to centralized bureaucratic imperialism. I believe that concerning the *Arthaśāstra* there has been a certain amount of misconception. How influential was it in its own day ? We have very few manuscripts of it and not very many references to it in later literature. There is a famous passage in Bāṇa in which he criticizes it, and a few others only. How wide a public did it reach ? How widely was it studied in ancient India in comparison with the political portions of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mānava Dharma Śāstra*? In fact, it seems probable that the influence of the *Arthaśāstra* on ancient Indian thought and polity was comparatively small, while that of the other texts was tremendous. Hence we should give the latter far more weight in assessing the general pattern of ancient Indian polity than that we give to the *Arthaśāstra*.

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[1] *The Beginnings of Indian Historiography*, . . (Calcutta, 1944), p. 166.

Historical myths will invariably develop among rising and growing nations. They are to be found in England, in the nations of Europe, and in America, and India has them too. To my mind it is not the purpose of the university teacher to help develop such myths—that is for the politicians and journalists. One such historical myth which was developed in British India is this : that India has only been happy and prosperous when the major part of the land was united under a single government of centralizing and authoritarian type—the Mauryas, the Guptas, the Mughals, the British Raj. This view was sedulously propagated by Vincent Smith, who made no attempt whatever to conceal the moral which he drew from it in favour of the centralizing and authoritarian government that happened to be in power at the time. He called on Candragupta Maurya and Asoka to witness the blessings of this splendid, centralized and bureaucratic regime. He made much of the tradition of the *Digvijayin* and the *Cakravartin* as evidence of the original desire of India for political unity, a desire which had only been fulfilled by the British Raj. *Mutatis* *mutandis*, the same attitude has been taken up by some nationalist writers in India at the present time, from a rather different point of view.

We know no very good way of calculating and comparing the human happiness and welfare in two states of the past. But there is no real evidence to establish this proposition that India has always been happier, better and more prosperous under a single authoritative regime than under a number of smaller regimes. For instance we have no evidence whatever to show that the Western Deccan was happier under Aśoka than it was later on under the Śātavāhanas. In the past, the whole genius of Indian civilization has favoured a wide diversity—political, social and cultural—within the broad framework of the Aryan Dharma, and Indian civilization has flourished and developed in that diversity.

Aśoka sent out his *Dharma Mahāmātras* from Pāṭalīputra to all parts of his enormous empire. As we gather from the Greek inscription of Kandahar he instructed them to ensure that the fishermen ceased to fish and the hunters ceased the hunt. It is not at all clear whether the fishermen and the hunters willingly accepted Aśoka's exhortations to non-violence or whether any coercion was used in forcing them to give up their professions, but in any case Aśoka seems to have thought that he was successful in converting them to *ahiṁsā*. But his was an exceptional case. Even the *Arthaśāstra*, the most centralizing in tendency of all the texts on Indian polity, deprecates political or social unity. When a king conquers and occupies another country, says the *Arthaśāstra*, he must respect and maintain the customs of that country, and when he visits it, he must wear its clothes and speak its language—the last injunction is perhaps specially significant. The *Digvijayins* and *Cakravartins* of legend are in no way comparable to Aśoka, much less to Queen Victoria, and they give no support to a policy of bureaucratic centralization. The ideal Digvijayin goes out at the head of his forces, and, in fair and chivalrous spirit, respecting captives and non-combatants, conquers all the other kings of Bhāratavarṣa. He has no high political purpose in doing so. His purpose is to add to his own glory and also to gain the great spiritual merit which righteous victory brings. The Digvijayin accepts the homage and the tribute of the kings whom he conquers, and they remain on their respective thrones, but he is now their overlord. If they quarrel among themselves, he is the arbitrator, and they come to him for judgment. They give him tribute, but as long as they are more or less just and loyal they still remain the rulers of their respective lands, governing according to their own traditions and customs.

This was the ideal of Hindu India. It was certainly desired that all Bhāratavarṣa should be under one overlord, but not under one centralizing, bureaucratic overlord. Perhaps, translated into 20th century democratic terms, the ideal of Hindu India would be a federation of internally independent states. But to conclude I must again emphasize that I do not suggest that either the former British government or the present Government of India have been too centralizing in their policies. In discussing the ideas behind ancient Indian government it is not my purpose to give advice on what ought to be done in contemporary Indian politics, or to forecast what will be done in the Indian politics of the future. Just as, in my opinion, the historian can give no valuable or useful advice on contemporary political issues, so he can give no valuable or useful forecasts on what is going to happen, because every political and historical situation is unique. There is no precedent in history for an India where one can travel from one end of the subcontinent to the other in three or four hours. This fact alone renders all generalizations based on India's earlier history invalid. The problems which India faces today are, in the light of 3000 or more years of history, completely novel ones ; and it is for the politicians and the people who elect them rather than the historians to provide a solution to such problems. So if I can give any advice to those who are interested in contemporary Indian politics, it is this: when somebody says "this policy is not in keeping with ancient Indian political traditions and therefore it is bad", you should take no notice of him.

The present is the product of the past, and by studying the past we may understand the present better. But if there are any eternal truths, they are to be found in the realms of religion, ethics and the natural sciences. Such features of the contemporary world as the hydrogen bomb, ultra-rapid means of transport, and the phenomenal growth of the world's population, have, at least in the sphere of politics, rendered all the generalizations of previous centuries invalid, and the politicians of the modern world are like the chiefs of nomadic tribes guiding their followers through completely unexplored terrain, very different from any they have known before. The experience of their ancestors is of little or no help to them, and if they rely too strongly on the precepts of their forebears they may well bring the peoples they lead to complete destruction.

III

RELIGIOUS LIFE

I HAVE decided to recast this lecture in the light of a remarkable document which was handed to me yesterday by a young man who attended my first two meetings and was apparently rather impressed by my emphasis on the essential individualism of ancient Indian thought. Among other things, he writes: "The Hindu way of salvation meant on its positive side an escape from the self-centered way of life, a release into a fuller and wider consciousness here and now. But it had the undesirable effect negatively of cultivating a studied indifference to and a negation of this life as merely an illusion to be wondered at, got exasperated by, but never to be challenged. This negative side of salvation only flourished by making the individual blind to everything else . . . and enabling him to concentrate in an ivory tower on the ascetic ideal, musing with an immensely superior and pleasant feeling on the utter hopelessness and the vacuity of all human endeavour. It was all *māyā* and so naturally could not be bothered much about". This very interesting note gives a personal and pessimistic view of the classical Indian attitude to life, and its author concludes "with a request for kind consideration of this aspect in your lecture on religious thought". So I have revised the notes of this lecture, and perhaps some of my remarks may give an implicit answer, if not a direct one, to the writer of this very interesting, sincere and eloquently written document.

I propose to conclude my series of lectures with a brief consideration of some aspects of traditional Indian life and thought which have special significance for the present time, and, in my opinion, rather differentiate the Indian way of looking at the world from that of

Europe and America. We often tend to forget that the religious life of ancient India was a very varied one. The idea has prevailed in some people's minds that Indian religion was all of one pattern, the pattern of the Upaniṣadic seers and the later philosophers, the profound mystics searching after the Absolute, a pattern of "plain living and high thinking", as one very respected Indian Indologist once put it. In fact, the literature of India shows a very varied pattern of religious life, as indeed it does of life and thought in all their aspects. Hinduism, we must remember, grew up organically over four millennia, through many stages of religious activity.

Let us not be misled by the high flowering of Indian religious philosophy into thinking that Hinduism was primarily a matter of thought. Action is prior to thought. Emotion is prior to thought. And all religions, it seems to me, in their primitive and early levels spring from the almost instinctive response of man to the mysteries and unpredictable features of his environment. The fundamental and basic element of Indian religion, from which everything else sprang, was the propitiation of the spirits of the earth and sky to obtain good crops and fertile herds. This aspect of Hinduism, as all Hindus know, still continues, overlaid by much more developed and exalted religious thought. And this is not, in my opinion, an aspect of religion to be disparaged, to be looked down upon, or to be treated with scorn. We can trace it back to the Harappā culture and even further back to prehistoric man, the ancestor of the present *ādivāsī*.

Upon this basis were laid many later strata : the cult of the celestial divinities of the Aryans with their sacrificial rituals, lengthy, expensive and often bloody ; the doctrines of *karma* and *saṁsāra ;* the mystical search for final release and ultimate and complete security in that which was considered Absolute ; the heterodox movements, chief of which were Buddhism and Jainism ; the social doctrines of *Varṇāśrama Dharma* as enshrined in the many texts on law ; the early devotionalism

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of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and similar texts; the developed philosophies of the six schools; the Tantric rites of the great Mother; the vernacular devotionalism of the medieval *bhakta* hymnodists; and finally the reforming Hinduism of modern sages from Ram Mohan Roy onwards. All these features have at different times in its very long history been innovations in Hinduism and have marked phases in its development.

From the fundamental, simple and very ancient basis of nature worship, the changes which have taken place in Indian religious life and thought may well have had some relationship to changing social conditions. All of us who have made even a little study of Indian history know that Indian society and Indian civilization have altered steadily and gradually over 5000 years. I am by no means a supporter of the dialectical materialist hypothesis that religion is merely a reflection of economic and social conditions, and that changes in religious practice and religious beliefs are merely reactions to changes in the class structure or in the means of production. But obviously, whatever may be the eternal or ultimate truth, which is supposed never to alter, whatever its unchanging fundamentals, religion does tend to adapt its modes of worship, its social sanctions, and its systems of belief to changing conditions. And it is tempting to try and find parallels in the changing social and political order of ancient or medieval India for certain striking innovations in India's religious life.

Possibly the growth of mystical gnosis and the general development of pessimism among many intelligent men in the centuries before the Buddha accompanied the break-up of old tribes and the constitution of regional kingdoms of a new kind, wherein men felt insecure in the face of what was to come to pass upon earth. We can parallel the rise of Buddhism and Jainism, and of the many other smaller heterodox systems of salvation which came into being about the 6th century B.C., with the rise of an important mercantile class needing less expensive and less complicated rituals and demanding a more significant rôle in the religious life of India than the Brahmans would concede. Similarly, we can perhaps consider the rise of Theism from the *Bhagavad Gītā* onwards in connection with the condition of the things after the downfall of the Mauryas, when quasi-feudal tendencies began to reappear in the governmental system of India, culminating in the typical kingdom of the medieval period, where a single overlord would command a large number of vassals who were expected to show him devoted service. It is obvious that we can hardly consider the rise of Hindu reform from Ram Mohan onwards, except in the light of the emergence of a new kind of Indian middle class which was very interested in politics and was subject to the impact of western ideas.

Thus there can be no doubt that social and economic factors had considerable effect upon the development of Indian religion. But I cannot emphasize too strongly that all these phases, whether we believe them to be optimistic or pessimistic, good or evil, world-denying or world-affirming, depend ultimately on the simple beliefs of peasants and herdsmen which were at different times incorporated into the Hindu system and which have continued from the earliest times down to the present day. The same is true of all the great religions of the world, but in none of them is the ancient heritage so evident as in Hinduism, and this I believe, is the source of its strength and "survival value", rather than the reverse.

Bearing this in mind let us not think of the religious life of ancient India as a gloomy or "other worldly" one. If in theory the ultimate aim of all life was Mokṣa, that was only the ultimate aim, and it is quite evident that the ordinary man did not worry unduly about it. Mokṣa was something to which he could look forward in the long distant future, after many births and re-births. For the time being, and for an indefinite time in the future, the three lesser aims of Dharma, Artha and Kāma were sufficient. And so the ebullient vitality, the world-affirming character of ancient and medieval Indian religion is made very evident from the many surviving works of art. These were evidently intended to appeal to a wide popular audience, while the *Upaniṣads* and the great philosophical commentaries were intended to appeal only to a very narrow one. From the earliest significant Indian religious art to have survived, excluding that of the Harappā culture—the carvings of the Stūpas of Bhārhut and Sāñcī—down to that of the late medieval period at Khajuraho, Konarak and elsewhere, we find this intense feeling of vitality, of the beauty and goodness of the earth, quite different from the rather negative attitude of some parts of the *Upaniṣads* and the Buddhist scriptures. It is in art that we find represented the religion of the ordinary man, whether the ordinary man's Hinduism or the ordinary man's Buddhism, and not in the *Upaniṣads* or in the *Dīgha Nikāya*. In my view ancient and medieval Hinduism and Buddhism, in practice, were not religions of "life-negation", though they may have contained some life-negating elements.

The fundamental religion on which the others grew was a simple cult of nature, which was regulated by the Brahman to become a force for the preservation of society through detailed and complex systems of ritual practices and class and caste observances. As it progressed, Hinduism assimilated many elements. Certainly, some of its innovations were not very attractive, especially as Hindu culture gradually lost its freshness in the middle ages, when it acquired such unpleasant features as widow burning, child marriage and ritual suicide. But also it gave birth to the most subtle schools of philosophy. Its hermits and sages lived lives of extreme sanctity. It produced works of very high ethical content such as the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the Tamil *Kural.* It gave birth to great art and great literature.

This perennial vitality of Hinduism was largely due to the fact that it succeeded in assimilating local elements from all over the subcontinent, as it assimilated ideas and practices introduced by successive invaders. The Hinduism of the Tamil country is not quite the same as the Hinduism of Maharashtra, and the Hinduism of Maharashtra is not quite the same as the Hinduism of Bengal, though all are evidently and recognizably Hinduism. They have their own divinities, often very similar. For instance Murugan and Aiyanar among the Tamils, Vithoba among the Maharashtrians, Manasā and Śaṣṭhī among the Bengalis, are all of them very significant in their own regions but hardly noticed outside.

Thus Hinduism has shown all through its existence and still shows a remarkable assimilative character, to which we shall return at the end of this lecture. It is not something that was imposed from above, as Christianity, for instance, was imposed on many European peoples by kings and chiefs in the dark ages. It has grown organically from roots deep in the soil and as such, for all its elements of life-negation, it remains a social religion, a religion equally suitable for the learned theologians, for the polished intellectuals, and for the simple people worshipping their divinities in local shrines as much for temporal blessings as for spiritual ones. When we consider Hinduism, let us not merely concentrate on the fine, beautiful and very sweet fruits at the top of the tree. The leaves also have their beauty ; the trunk is firm, strong and solid ; the roots go deep down into the earth. And it is the roots which feed the fruits.

The India of the present day is a very significant element in the world community of nations. Whether it remains a land of poverty and hunger or becomes a rich industrialized nation, it is likely to remain important in the life of the world. India has been at nearly all times in the world's history a force to be reckoned with, for it is one of the great germinal centres of the world's culture. From India, in the early centuries of the Christtian era, Hindu and Buddhist teachers spread their religions and cultures widely in South East Asia, and the Buddhists went even further, to the Far East, where their religion adopted special local forms. Since the end of the last century, when Swami Vivekananda preached in Europe and America, India has again become a centre of world-wide religious propaganda, and the influence of Indian religious ideas is already significant in the thought of the world. As in politics, so in philosophy, in religious thought, and in cultural life, India is once more an important element in the life of the world after centuries of subjugation and comparative insignificance.

Many people in Europe and America, and indeed many in India too, tend to think of India as a land where, at least until in recent years, culture has not changed significantly for millennia, and where every aspect of life has been geared to religious values, the search for the immutable, Ultimate and Absolute in a world of sorrow and change. Surely I have said enough to show that this picture is not an accurate one. As a further example of specious generalization I may mention the idea, especially widespread in the West in the last century, of India as a fundamentally unhappy land, where a rigid social system is clamped down upon wretched, poverty-stricken millions, and where a cruel and irrational religion has encouraged the masses to maintain superstitious and often positively evil practices. This view of India is evidently still that of some Indians, for it seems to be at the back of the mind of the gentleman who handed me the little document. Formerly in the West it was much propagated by missionaries returning from India, but nowadays it is more often spread by rationalists and Marxists among the Indians themselves. This picture of the religious life of India may contain a small element of truth, but as a broad generalization it is positively false.

As a third generalization, at the other extreme, we are given a picture of India as the repository of an ancient and unchanging wisdom, the land of high thinking and plain living where all human activity is directed towards the goal of spiritual merit and salvation. Compared with the sages of the *Upaniṣads*, the profound mystics of the West fade into insignificance.

In fact none of these generalizations are at all accurate. Indian culture in ancient and medieval days was many-sided and it is still many-sided, and no generalization about it can be more than partly true. The "superstitious" beliefs and observances said to have been clamped down on ignorant peasants by unscrupulous Brahmans have in fact often been sources of psychological security and much simple happiness. The quest for spiritual riches was always affected by a quest for temporal riches, for power, for the pleasures of the senses. Probably at no time, except perhaps in very recent years, has India been notably more religiously minded than the rest of the world. There was just as much religious faith and as much religious activity of an intense kind in medieval Europe as there was in India at the same time. It is only in the last century or so, when in the West there has been something of a retreat from religious values, that there may be some difference between India and the West in this respect. The retreat has gone much further in Europe and America than it has in India, though it seems to be rapidly gaining momentum in India itself.

Indian culture, especially in its religious aspect, has certain special features of its own which distinguish it from the culture of the West and indeed from the cultures of China and of the Middle East and from all other cultures of the world. In no period before the Renaissance, was there a sharp cleavage between Europe and Asia. In ancient and medieval times the civilized world contained four main cultural centres: working from East to West—China, India, the Middle East, and Europe. These four centres of culture possessed civilizations with their own special character, equally different one from the other, though in their respective ways of life and thought there was perhaps much more in common between medieval India and medieval Europe than there was between medieval India and medieval China. Geographically, the distinction between Europe and Asia is an artificial and man-made concept. There are no sharply defined natural boundaries between the two continents as there are between the Eurasian land-mass and Africa, or even more obviously between the three continents of the old world and the two Americas. Culturally there have been not two, but four great nuclei of civilization, mutually influencing one another at all times, with their frontiers indeterminate and blurring one into the other. The imagined polarity between Europe and Asia, Orient and Occident, is in my view historically a false one, consciously or unconsciously encouraged on both sides by political expediency or the needs of religious propaganda or counter-propaganda. Moreover in the last 100 years the distinctions between the great cultural centres of the world have become less and less pronounced, and probably every year they diminish further.

Nevertheless certain aspects of Indian culture, especially those connected with religion, do reveal differences in the Indian approach to life as compared with that of Europe and America on the one hand and those of the Middle East and of China on the other. Some observers, especially those in the last century who never really got to grips with the Indian way of life, have rather exaggerated the difference between Hindu attitudes and those of the West, and have said that "never the twain shall meet". This dictum is, of course, grossly over-pessimistic and the poet who first enunciated it qualified it in the next line ; but no less dangerous is the contrary idea, widely propagated by some people today, that there is no real difference at all in the traditional attitudes of India and the West, and that all apparent differences are based on economics, one being poor and backward and the other being advanced and rich. This is also far too sweeping a generalization.

I believe that there are three fundamental points on which Indian attitudes, whether Hindu or Buddhist, differ from those of the western world. Those three points are still to some extent valid, even among people who have theoretically given up religious values and religious beliefs. The first is in the concept of class. The traditional Hindu system of class and caste has already been dealt with and there is no need to go into its details here. The idea of the community consisting of four estates, probably going back to 1000 B.C., is typical of Indian socio-religious thought. Men are not brothers, they are not equals ; all have their places in society, all are valid and significant, but not all have the same place or the same significance. By pointing this out, I do not imply that one attitude is good and the other is bad, that one view of mankind is evil and the other righteous, but I am simply giving the facts of traditional Hindu social thought. We must not undervalue or disparage the system of classes and castes. It gave a great sense of security, both social and economic, to its members. It helped to preserve law and order in time of trouble. It maintained Hindu culture against attacks and propaganda, both Muslim and Christian. From the time of the Buddha, the concepts of class and caste have been opposed in India in one way or another, but until comparatively recently they have never been much affected by criticism.

On the other hand, in theory at any rate, in Christianity there is neither bond nor free, and all souls are equal in the sight of God. In Islam the same is true. Within the faith all men are brothers. Of course, these fine principles have not usually worked in practice. In many parts of medieval Europe the class system was quite as rigid as it was at the same time in many parts of medieval India. But the principle of religious equality was always there. In older Hindu writings, until the days of certain *bhakta* teachers, the idea that all men whatever are of equal worth is hardly heard of, and it is only in the last 100 years that Hindu reformers have explicitly put forward such propositions. These have undoubtedly had great influence not only on the intelligentsia but also on many sections of the masses. The old ideas of class and caste are evidently slowly disappearing, but survivals of their influence even among educated and apparently very modern Indians can frequently be seen.

A second feature of Indian religious life which differentiates it sharply from that of the West is the doctrine of transmigration, *Saṁsara*. This gives infinite chances to everyone. Perhaps the corollary of this is to lay somewhat less emphasis on ultimate and fundamental decisions, for any decision may be reversed over an infinite number of lives. However hard you try, you cannot damn yourself eternally. A further corollary is the ultimate unity of all life. According to the traditional beliefs of the old-fashioned Hindu, the worm you carelessly tread on may contain the soul which once belonged to your grandmother. And thus religion is not merely a matter of humanity, but it is a matter of all living things whatever; and with the Jains it even includes plants, metals and stones, for the whole world is alive. Hence in Indian religions, with the exception of the system of Madhva, who was probably influenced by Christianity, the idea of eternal damnation hardly occurs. The worst hell may ultimately be escaped from, and there are an infinite number of new chances of self-improvement and development; likewise there are an infinite number of chances of falling into evil and unhappy conditions. That might be thought of as a rather exciting prospect, and probably many simple Indians are quite satisfied with it, though it has never been agreeable to the leaders of religious thought, and they have always tried to find means of escape from this monotonous and uncertain round of birth and death.

Moreover, for the orthodox Hindu, the world is infinite in duration and immense in size. For the old-fashioned Christian, even after the days of Galileo, the world was that of Ptolemaic cosmology, a very simple and easily intelligible cosmos with the earth in the centre and the sun and the planets revolving round it at reasonable distances, all safely walled in by Empyrean, which contained the fixed stars. It was a comfortable and friendly little universe in comparison with the immense cosmos of Hinduism.

Similarly, the universe of Christian tradition was of moderate and understandable duration. It was created by the act of God about 4004 years before Christ, according to the orthodox and traditional Protestant calculation, and at any time it might come to an end, when a new and better world would take its place. On the other hand, the Hindu believes in an endless series of cycles within cycles throughout all eternity in an immensely large universe containing many worlds. And within this enormous cosmos each being has innumerable chances of achieving perfection or of damning himself for a very lengthy period. And so in Indian eschatology and cosmology there is not the same sense of finality as in the traditional western religions, in which I include Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Zoroastrianism. In those religions a man is born once and once only, and his future status for all eternity is decided according to his behaviour or his faith in this one life. These differences have conditioned the attitudes and the approach to life of the people of the different civilizations concerned. The Hindu's belief in transmigration gives him a sense of unity with all living things, and has contributed to the vegetarianism of most high caste Hindus. Also it may have made him less forthright and definite than the Westerner, in matters demanding final decisions.

The third distinctive feature of the Indian religious attitude is less immediately striking than the other two, but is equally or more important, and it is as much in evidence today as it was in the past. I call it "inclusiveness".

In Western thought, with which I include that of Islam and Zoroastrianism, there is a tendency to see all things as either black or white. In religious terms this tendency probably finds its most impressive illustration in the Zoroastrian insistence on choice between good and evil, which has largely been inherited by the other religions of the West. In philosophy the same tendency appears as Aristotle's law of the excluded middle. If a proposition is not true, it is false. It is either x or not-x. With this, at the opposite extreme, we may compare the Jaina doctrine of *Syādvāda*, according to which there are many degrees and aspects of truth and a proposition may be true and false at the same time. In pointing out this distinction I have again no wish to suggest that one attitude is true and correct and the other is false and incorrect ; I merely try to show that a difference of points of view does exist.

In the field of religion the exclusive approach of Western thought has expressed itself in the view that a man is either saved or damned, either a believer or a heathen. This point of view, as I have said elsewhere, is typified in religious terms by the words attributed to Jehovah on Sinai, "Thou shalt have none other Gods but me" ; this commandment has been inherited by Christian and Muslim, and in a different form it appears also in Zoroastrianism. With it we can compare a passage from the *Bhagavad Gītā*: "Whatever God you may worship", says Kṛṣṇa, the incarnate Godhead speaking to Arjuna before the great battle, "I answer the prayer".

In this connection we may also consider the remarkable, and from the Western point of view completely illogical, dictum of the great modern Hindu sage Ramakrishna : "All religions are true". The westerner with no special knowledge is inclined to dismiss that statement as being just rubbish. All religious doctrines cannot be true. The doctrine of transmigration and the western doctrine of one birth only may both be false, but logically it is impossible that both are true, for they are mutually exclusive. Yet Ramakrishna was no fool, and he would hardly have uttered a completely illogical sentence without good reason. If we try to cease to think in Aristotelian terms, we may be able to see some point in Ramakrishna's pronouncement.

It is through this inclusive spirit, diametrically opposite to the older traditional western one of exclusiveness, that Hindu culture has always found it easy to incorporate new elements, and the process has not ceased. In the minds of many good and pious Hindus Jesus Christ is a divinity of the Hindu Pantheon. I have myself seen devout, unbaptized, simple Hindus praying most reverently before a statue of the Virgin Mary in Colombo. So also some Hindus can accept Karl Marx as a sort of *avatāra*. I have met Gandhian Marxists and Marxist Gandhians. The policy which by the present Indian Government is called non-alignment can perhaps be better interpreted as a sort of partial alignment with both camps. By taking this feature of Indian thought into account I believe that I can understand my very good Hindu and Buddhist friends much better than I would otherwise. They are brought up in this spirit, which is part of the Indian tradition of inclusiveness, of striving to assimilate apparently opposing elements. So the Hindu caste system, the Hindu doctrine of the aims of life, and many other features of the Hindu tradition present a remarkable synthesis of rigid social uniformity and ultimate individualism. And it is in this spirit, I believe, that India is trying to incorporate elements of other cultures into her own particular pattern of life and thought, and is developing and modifying her traditions.

And with that, Mr. Chairman and friends, I thank you for listening to me and for giving me this great honour of delivering the Heras Memorial Lectures.

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Aspects of Ancient Indian Culture

A. L. Basham

This book has grown out of a series of three lectures delivered by Professor A. L. Basham, the distinguished British indologist, in January 1964 under the auspices of the Heras Institute of Indian History and Culture, Bombay.

Professor Basham, who discusses life and thought in Ancient India principally in its social, political and religious contexts, arrives at certain conclusions which are contrary to those generally accepted, whether in India or the West. He is of the opinion that ancient Indian society was, contrary to the modern general belief in its corporate character, fundamentally individualistic. He also stresses that the ideal political structure envisaged in ancient India was more in the nature of a federation of internally independent states unlike the commonplace axiom that India in the past was happy only under a single, centralizing government. In his final lecture, Professor Basham makes a sharp distinction between the nature of Indian religious thought and Western attitudes of mind, contrasting the "inclusiveness" of the former with the "exclusiveness" of the latter.

A. L. Basham, Professor of South Asian History, London University, is currently with the Department of Oriental Civilization, School of Oriental Studies, Australian National University, Canberra.

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